

**The Strange Case of Diego Rivera and  
the U.S. State Department\***

by

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with Dana Reed

Diego Rivera ranks among the world's great artists. His spectacularly colorful murals and paintings evoking the dignity, lives and struggles of laboring people stand as enduring testaments to his commitment to human emancipation and freedom. His artistic renderings of exploitation were powerful and passionate. His commitment to social change also animated his political life, although his political behavior was quite erratic and often perplexing. For most of his adult life, Rivera actively participated in revolutionary politics, first as a member of the Mexican Communist Party (PCM), from which he was expelled in 1928, later as a Trotskyist and vehement critic of Stalinism, and towards the end of his life, once again, as a Communist.

Rivera's love-hate relationship with the PCM and the Stalinist movement, and his idiosyncratic political behavior are well known. What is not well known is Rivera's short-lived role as an anti-Communist informant for the U.S. State Department. During the first half of 1940, after having broken with Trotskyism and while he was the object of the PCM's public scorn, Rivera met secretly with American Consulate officials in the Federal District of Mexico and provided them with information about the PCM's alleged activities, members, and influence in various Mexican political and labor organizations as well as in the U.S. This essay draws from U.S. State Department records to detail the irascible artist's brief and unusual relationship with the U.S. State Department in the hope of stimulating a discussion of why he acted as he did. In light of Patrick Marnham's recent biography of Rivera,<sup>1</sup> in which Rivera's political activities play a minor role, and the present U.S. tour of many of Rivera's paintings, bringing Rivera's politics back into any discussion of his art seems appropriate. Having had murals destroyed or removed for his depiction of political figures, he would have found the separation to be artificial.

To appreciate Rivera's behavior in 1940, one must first appreciate his revolutionary credentials. In late 1922, at the age of 36, Rivera joined the



fledging PCM. He quickly assumed leading roles, being elected to its Executive Committee in 1923. That year he joined with David Alfaro Siqueiros and other artists to organize the Communist Union of Painters and Sculptors and he became a co-editor of its newspaper, *El Machete*, which later became the PCM's official newspaper. In the mid-1920s, he served on the Executive Committees of both the Anti-Colonial League and the Anti-Imperialist League, movements tied to the Communist International (Comintern), and was the editor of the Anti-Imperialist League's publication, *La Libertad*. Rivera proudly wore his anti-imperialist politics when he attended the 10th anniversary celebration of the Bolshevik Revolution in Moscow in 1927. Nonetheless, in September 1928, he was expelled from the PCM, in part for his growing sympathy with Trotsky who had been expelled from the Soviet Communist Party.

Rather than abandon politics, over the next eight years, Rivera became an increasingly active supporter of Leon Trotsky. In mid-1936, Rivera was elected to the Political Bureau of tiny and ineffectual Mexican Trotskyist party, the *Liga Comunista Internacionalista*, later renamed the *Partido Obrero Internacionalista*. That fall, he helped to secure political asylum for Trotsky in Mexico. Trotsky lived in one of Frida Kahlo's and Rivera's houses from January 1937 until May 1939. It was there that the Dewey Commission held its hearings and cleared Trotsky of the charges leveled against him during the August 1936 and January 1937 Moscow show trials. During this period, Rivera fell increasingly under the exiled revolutionary's political influence. Never before had the impulsive muralist spent so much time with so profound and mesmerizing a theoretician as Trotsky. Although they disagreed about certain issues, Rivera shared Trotsky's belief that the PCM and all Communist parties associated with the Comintern had become nothing more than political puppets of Stalin and the Soviet police. He and Trotsky also believed that Lombardo Toledano, the head of the *Confederacion de Trabajadores Mexicanos* (CTM), Mexico's largest and most powerful labor federation, and other Mexican radicals were Kremlin agents. Rivera clung tightly to these opinions even after breaking with Trotsky in 1939.

The PCM, which had earlier attacked Rivera for painting murals for Ford and Rockefeller Center, relentlessly denounced Rivera's support for Trotsky against whom Moscow waged a strident international campaign. It was not those attacks, but rather political differences that strained the two



men's relationship. By late 1938, Trotsky had become exasperated with Rivera's erratic political behaviors and insistence on heading the Mexican Trotskyist movement. Whether or not Rivera had learned of an affair between Kahlo and Trotsky, thereby adding a personal dimension to the political break, is open to debate. In early 1939, Rivera quit the Trotskyist movement and the two men broke personal relations.<sup>2</sup>

His departure left Rivera in a communist's no-man's land. His years with Trotsky had made him a staunch critic of the PCM and the Stalinist movement, but his antipathy to fascism and reactionary politics ran equally deep. Over the next two years, Rivera frequently attacked and made a series of public allegations about the activities of both Communists and Nazis and their agents in Mexico. It was during this period that he met with U.S. Consulate officials. But following the 1941 invasion of the U.S.S.R., Rivera's sympathies for Communism and the USSR reemerged. He applied for re-admission to the PCM in 1941 and in 1946, and regularly thereafter, but only was re-admitted in 1954, three years before his death.

Rivera and Trotsky were hardly the only ones concerned about Communist influence in Mexico. So too was the U.S. State Department, which feared the PCM's rising influence and militancy, support for the confiscation and/or nationalization of properties owned by U.S. nationals, increasing denunciations of the U.S., organizing efforts among Mexican nationals working in the U.S., and what it believed to be growing support in Mexico for a "Soviet form of government as a solution to Mexico's economic maladjustments."<sup>3</sup> The State Department was also concerned about fascist political and economic activities in Mexico. Despite their differences, in 1939-40, Rivera and the U.S. government shared common enemies. The Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939 heightened U.S. anxieties about anti-American activities in Mexico and reinforced Rivera's conviction that Soviet Communism had become a bankrupt revolutionary movement.

Rivera's public attacks on the PCM and Kremlin were often dramatic. For example, in September 1938, before his break with Trotsky, he gave foreign news correspondents a list of people whom he charged with being "open or veiled members of the Communist Party [of Mexico] and thus agents of the OGPU," the Soviet police.<sup>4</sup> He charged that four personal advisors to President Cardenas (Enrique Calderon, Mario Souza, Victor Manual Villasenor, and Anna Maria Reyna) were Soviet police agents and that two



high-ranking officials in the Ministry of National Defense, four officials in the Ministry of the Treasury, sixteen in the Ministry of Public Education, and four in government banks were Communists and/or OGPU agents. According to Rivera, the Ministry of Communications and Public Works was honeycombed with Stalinist agents, and thirty-seven members of the Chamber of Deputies and seven senators were Communists. He leveled similar charges against the CTM's leader Lombardo Toledano, the editor of the newspaper *El Nacional*, and others. The CTM, PCM and other organizations and officials denied and condemned Rivera's allegations. His charges had little lasting impact other than to further anger PCM and CTM leaders and members, but they illustrate Rivera's belief that Communists posed a serious threat to Mexico.

Rivera proved his willingness to expose Communist influence when, in December 1939, he announced his intention to testify before the Dies Committee, formally known as the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities, chaired by Congressman Martin Dies from Texas. Trotsky also agreed to testify before the Dies Committee. Begun in May 1938, the Dies Committee conducted a widespread investigation of allegedly subversive activities in the U.S. Although it investigated allegations of both Communist and fascist subversion, it demonstrated a profoundly anti-communist bias. Trotsky and Rivera no longer spoke to each other, but both were eager to expose their shared enemy's alleged activities. Trotsky announced that he intended to testify about the Comintern's role in and influence over CPUSA and the North American labor movement. Rivera planned to testify about "the extensive activities of Stalinist agents in Mexico and other countries in Latin America,"<sup>5</sup> and told foreign correspondents that he would provide the Committee with information on both Communist and Nazi activities in Mexico. After Rivera's and Trotsky's intentions became public in December 1939, Rivera met with correspondents and gave them the same list of alleged Communists that he had given them fourteen months earlier.<sup>6</sup>

Trotsky's reasons for wanting to testify before the Dies Committee are understandable. Although he temporarily enjoyed asylum in Mexico, he was a man without a country or a passport locked in a mortal struggle with Stalin. The hearings would have provided him with a forum in which to denounce Stalin, his agents, and the CPUSA, as well as to procure a visa to the U.S.,



something he had sought for six years. Given that both Mexican presidential candidates had vowed to expel Trotsky from the country, appearing before the Dies Committee increased the possibility of weakening Stalinist movement and enhancing his personal security. Trotsky's motives made sense, but Rivera's reasoning is unclear. Whereas his desire to weaken the Stalinist movement was obvious, the logic behind discussing Mexican affairs with a U.S. congressional committee is harder to discern. His willingness to thrust Mexican politics into Dies' unfolding witch hunt illustrates how dramatically the attitudes of the former leader of the Anti-Imperialist League had changed.

But it was not to be. The State Department only learned of Dies' invitations when Trotsky's secretaries inquired about his receiving a visa. A bewildered and angry Adolf Berle, the Assistant Secretary of State, exerted considerable pressure on Dies, who in late December reluctantly withdrew his invitations to Trotsky and Rivera.

Their desire to appear before the Dies Committee unleashed a hailstorm of denunciations, especially from the PCM, a long-time critic of American imperialist activities in Mexico. Speakers at the January 10, 1940 PCM meeting angrily condemned "Dies, notorious representative of Wall Street in the Government of the United States who is interfering in the internal affairs of Mexico," and anyone willing to testify before his committee.<sup>7</sup>

Such condemnations did not deter Rivera. In late December 1939 or early January 1940, he met privately with an American reporter and gave him the names of 50 alleged Communists holding high government offices in Mexico. The list included the 39 names on his December 1939 list, plus some new ones. During the interview, Rivera claimed to have knowledge of political assassinations being carried out in connection with the ongoing Mexican presidential campaign. He spoke of political murders in the State of Puebla, the Governor of which, Maximino Avila Camacho, was the brother of Manuel Avila Camacho, the presidential candidate of the *Partido de la Revolucion Mexicana* (later renamed the PRI). Rivera told the reporter that "the assassinations of persons professing political affiliations contrary to Avila Camacho have averaged two a day; that the methods used in such assassinations are similar to those which were used by the extreme Leftists in Spain, namely two shots in the back of the head." Rivera believed that sixty people had been so executed, and he provided names of some of them. He



then described three hundred Spanish refugees who had emigrated to Mexico as "Stalin[']s gunmen, members of the OGPU and that these persons have begun to agitate in a manner in Mexico reminiscent of Stalinist agents in Spain." The reporter sent this information to the U.S. Consulate. In light of published reports about the murder of one agrarian leader in Puebla and confirmation from other sources of Rivera's charges about other political murders there, the Consulate decided that discussing such issues with Rivera was a wise course, even if his estimates of the number of murders was exaggerated.<sup>8</sup>

The day after the PCM's January 10th meeting, Robert McGregor, a member of the U.S. Consulate's staff, met with Rivera in his home. McGregor's goal was "to secure his [Rivera's] reactions on five specific subjects...1) Objectives and organizations of the Communist Party. 2) Communist affiliations of Spanish refugees in Mexico. 3) Internal political motives of the Mexican Communist Party. 4) Communist-Nazi collaboration in Mexico. 5) Mr. Rivera's political views." McGregor's report of their conversations sheds light on Rivera's political beliefs and confusion at the time.

McGregor began by asking "how Communism is financing itself in Mexico," to which Rivera replied "that most of the funds come from the United States." According to Rivera, Alejandro Carrillo, a PCM member and editor of the CTM's newspaper, *El Popular*, had visited the U.S. twice in 1939 to receive money for the party: In September, he allegedly received \$140,000; in November, he met with John L. Lewis, the head of the CIO, for money to support the CTM. Lewis rejected the request because "he had a verbal understanding with President Cardenas whereby matters of mutual interest would be freely discussed between them." According to Rivera, Lewis telegraphed Cardenas who responded that the CTM's difficulties were an internal Mexican affair. Rivera asserted that, nonetheless, Lewis stated that "he would be glad to help out in a personal way" and gave Carrillo a check for \$14,000. Such gifts were hard to trace because all "financial transactions of the Communists are carried on with the Banco Capitalizador de America, S.A. in Mexico City," key officers of which Rivera believed were Communists.

As to the Spanish refugees' political affiliations, Rivera stated that many were "trained Communists" who had been screened by Narciso Bassols, the former Mexican Ambassador to France, and Juan Negrin, the former



Prime Minister of the Spanish Republican Government. They allegedly "required each intending immigrant to secure a card showing membership in the Communist Party." Rivera claimed that only 15 per cent of the cards were valid, implying that the Soviet police forged the remainder. According to Rivera, Bassols had told Soviet authorities that "he was first a Communist and second, Mexican Minister to France" and that he "was now the head of the organization of communists of Spanish origin in Mexico." In that capacity, Bassols sought to secure Mexican citizenship for the refugees so that they "would be able to gain access to the United States more easily as Mexicans." Rivera then asserted that: "Many of the Spanish refugees are being distributed in small groups along the border of the United States with the idea that they would there form nuclei around which an anti-American system could be formed."

When queried about the PCM's "internal political motives", Rivera claimed to have been present at a meeting between General Mujica, who had hoped to succeed Cardenas as President, and PCM representatives, who offered to support Mujica's candidacy in exchange for his endorsement of the PCM's program. When Mujica refused, they allegedly made the same offer to Avila Camacho, Cardenas' eventual successor, who agreed to it, which was why "the Communist Party has been laboring night and day in support of Camacho's program." In his report on their conversation, McGregor wrote that "Rivera hazarded the opinion that should [Avila] Camacho be elected he will either be a dupe in the hands of the Communists or else a dupe in the hands of his brother, Maximino."

As proof of PCM-Nazi collaboration, Rivera showed McGregor the "simultaneous publication" of a denunciation of him in *La Voz de Mexico*, the PCM's newspaper, and on a Nazi poster. The timing and wording of both convinced Rivera that the Communists and Nazis were conspiring. McGregor "did not find his conclusions particularly valid."

Rivera then expounded upon his own political views, telling McGregor that he "had ceased to be an active revolutionary because he considered that this was impractical at the present time...[because of] the danger to the Western hemisphere which is paramount at this time." In his view, "Europe will endeavor to expand at the expense of the United States and in Latin America. Therefore, every effort should at present be made toward cooperation between the United States and Latin America in order to



form a mutually dependent economic system." But the PCM opposed such a coalition. According to Rivera, the "primary purpose" of the "Stalinist agents" who had attended the PCM's meeting the day before was "to prevent Latin American cooperation with the United States and solidarity within the Western hemisphere." In stark contrast to his earlier views on imperialism, Rivera stated "everyone knows the United States will not interfere in a political way to stop cooperation between labor organizations in the countries of Central and South America." Rather such collaboration would "continue and increase to the end that, one day, many years hence, a workers' revolution will be possible in the Western hemisphere." But that revolution "will not come from Russia," the experience of which had proven to Rivera that "it is impossible to 'industrialize' and 'revolutionize' at the same time."<sup>9</sup>

This essay's purpose is not to address the veracity of each of Rivera's charges. Suffice to say that there was and is little evidence to substantiate most of them. The State Department wisely viewed them with caution. One official there wrote: "In view of Rivera's known tendency towards exaggeration, if not even fabrication, many of his statements, I think, should be accepted with considerable reserve."<sup>10</sup> Even taking into account that the official, Lawrence Duggan, regularly met with his Soviet handler and gave him classified State Department information, Rivera's charges had little basis in fact. Rivera was, after all, renowned for inventing stories. He was a man who regularly reinvented his autobiography and was renown for weaving wild stories from whole cloth. This is not to say that Rivera did not believe what he told McGregor. He was at that time a confused and unpredictable revolutionary without a political home, a national cultural treasure publicly dispised and attacked by his former comrades. While we may never know how much he believed and how much he consciously invented, his allegations expressed his own and the State Department's anxieties. Given their eagerness to learn more about these issues,<sup>11</sup> Consulate officials in Mexico continued to seek Rivera's opinions.

In early February, Rivera met with a U.S. Consulate official who was interested in learning more about a PCM document that the Consulate had obtained and that discussed the party's objectives and criticized its shortcomings. When asked who had written the document, Rivera claimed that it was Dmitri Manuilsky, one of the Comintern's leaders, whom he erroneously charged had recently visited the U.S. and Mexico. Rivera then



named several other alleged Soviet agents whom he believed were in Mexico. Once again the Consulate staff was skeptical "[i]n view of the unreliability of much of the information which has been secured from this source." The State Department responded to the Consul General's report with two pages of reasons why not to believe Rivera.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, on March 2, 1940, McGregor again visited Rivera's home to discuss "the circumstances surrounding the dismissal from the Party [PCM] of Hernan Laborde, until recently Secretary General, and Valentin S. Campa, Secretary of the Mexican Communist Party." Laborde and Campa were but two of many PCM members expelled during the 1940 party purge, which was directed by the Comintern representative and Argentinian Communist Vittorio Codovilla. Rivera offered little insight into the purge, preferring instead to discuss his view that the PCM was at an historic crossroads as a result of presidential candidate Avila Camacho's "swing to the right." The PCM's dilemma was what to do--"to manoeuver the situation" so as to force Cardenas to suspend the election and thereby force Congress to extend his term, or to "embark on a bitter campaign against Cardenas forcing him...to declare the Party itself illegal." Rivera considered that the latter plan to be "more likely" because Moscow wanted "to maintain good relations with the United States. These relations could easily be jeopardized by the continued existence of communistic activities in Mexico." At that point, a visitor arrived, interrupt the conversation. Before leaving, McGregor told Rivera that "I desired to renew this conversation."<sup>13</sup> The available evidence does not indicate whether or not the two did so.

Although apparently unaware of Rivera's meetings with Consulate officials, during early 1940, the PCM intensified its attacks on Rivera for his willingness to appear before the Dies Committee and his public allegations about Communist infiltration. At its Extraordinary Congress in March and again in April, the PCM leadership denounced Rivera and Trotsky for their decisions to testify, and charged that Rivera and "possibly Trotsky" were the "visible leaders" of a "group of agent provocateurs" who were leaking information about the party to American officials and the press. Little did they know. Those attending the April meeting pledged to "take punitive action against the informers" and to make "every effort to get rid of Trotsky."<sup>14</sup>



Such was the environment when, on May 24, 1940, the Communist and Spanish Civil War veteran, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and a group of about twenty armed men stormed Trotsky's compound in an apparent attempt to assassinate him. The attempt failed, although one of Trotsky's American bodyguards, Robert Sheldon Harte, left with the attackers and was subsequently murdered.

Five days later, Rivera called the U.S. Consulate and requested "a Border Crossing Card to allow him to proceed to the United States, where he had to fulfill a contract with the [Golden Gate] Exposition authorities in San Francisco to paint a mural." McGregor, whom Rivera later described as "a good friend," met Rivera at the house of Erby Swift, his lawyer, where Rivera was hiding. Rivera and McGregor discussed at length the attack on Trotsky's home and the ongoing police investigation. Rivera "stated that his life was in danger and that it had been intimated to him on several occasions that he should take all possible precautions to prevent an attempt on his life." After telling McGregor that the American Communist, George Mink, was in Mexico, "[t]here followed a discussion between Rivera and Mr. Swift with regard to Mr. Rivera's proposed trip to the United States." They weighed "the advisability of applying to *Gobernacion* for the usual permit to leave the country and the alternative of leaving Mexico without a permit," deciding finally to arrange for the appropriate papers through the Governor of Tamaulipas with whom Rivera "maintained cordial relations." From there, Rivera could fly to Brownsville, Texas.<sup>15</sup>

On May 30, the Consulate issued Rivera a "border identification card in order that there will be no delay in identifying him at the border." The next day it informed the State Department of its action and sent a "rush telegram" to the Consulate in Tamaulipas informing it of Rivera's plans. That office then contacted the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in Brownsville, Texas. The INS hurriedly convened a Board of Special Inquiry which, after interviewing Rivera, voted "to admit him for a period of one year."<sup>16</sup> From Brownsville, Rivera and his travel companion, the Hollywood actress Paulette Goddard, flew to California.

Thus ended Rivera's brief relationship with the U.S. State Department. Although the latter viewed Rivera's allegations with considerable skepticism, the Consulate sufficiently appreciated his willingness to inform them of possible Communist activities that it helped to facilitate his hasty flight from



Mexico. It further showed its appreciation by not informing the FBI Special Agent in Charge in Mexico City of Rivera's plans to enter the U.S. until the last minute; even then, it provided inaccurate information.<sup>17</sup>

The evidence is unambiguous--in early 1940, Diego Rivera willingly met with U.S. Consulate officials on several occasions to discuss alleged Communist and Nazi activities in Mexico, Americans' support for Communist activities in Mexico, and Mexican intentions to infiltrate Communists into the U.S. Why he did so is less clear. One obvious explanation leaps to mind. Like his mentor Trotsky, Rivera considered the PCM to be a puppet of the Comintern and Kremlin, and believed that they posed a serious threat to Mexico. Anything that might expose Communist activities might reduce the threat. But that does not adequately explain why he agreed to testify about Mexican affairs before the Dies Committee or chose to meet clandestinely with representatives of a foreign government to denounce his fellow countrymen. Others had come to similar conclusions, yet behaved differently. He evidently believed at that moment that the Communist threat was so great that working with a foreign government that shared his anxieties and enemies was reasonable. Rivera's statements to McGregor about the need for inter-American unity and his opinion that "everyone knows the U.S. will not interfere" in Mexico indicate that he had jettisoned his earlier views on imperialism and rejected the anti-American sentiment expressed by the PCM and other Mexicans, a point underscored by his mural on "Pan-American Unity" that he painted in San Francisco in 1940. Informing the U.S. government about Communist activities in Mexico was not the treasonous or disloyal act for Rivera that it was for others. Nonetheless, he apparently never mentioned it to anyone during his lifetime.

In seeking to understand Rivera's motives, we must also keep in mind his personality. He was a passionate and selfish man, whose commitment to friends and lovers ran deep but could end abruptly; a man whose hatred of injustice was constant but whose ideas on how to end it shifted regularly. He had been a Communist and a Trotskyist, but his patrons included the Fords and Rockefeller. Although Rivera had broken with Communism and Trotskyism, he clearly retained the conspiratorial worldview that permeated those movements and also animated anti-communist zealots like Dies. That worldview structured the allegations Rivera made to U.S. Consulate officials.



By 1940, he had abandoned his earlier views on imperialism and become, at least temporarily, a committed pan-Americanist, a man who "had ceased to be an active revolutionary" because it was "impractical" given the threat Europe posed to the Americas. Some twenty years before, Rivera had turned his back on the European artistic scene and created his own uniquely pan-American artistic vision. Doing so transformed him from a struggling Parisian artist into the greatest pan-American muralist of the century. He seems to have believed that, in 1940, a unique pan-American political alternative existed. But even that vision was distinctly Rivera's. Few others could envision "a mutually dependent economic system" in the Americas in which "the United States will not interfere" and out of which "a workers' revolution will be possible." Rivera was, in short, a jumble of fervent beliefs and bewildering contradictions. He was emotionally incapable of adopting the steely political vision of a Lenin or a Trotsky. Hence we might consider judging him not by political standards and choose instead to relegate his actions to that tolerant realm reserved for artistic geniuses.

Yet the fact remains that for much of his adult life Rivera considered himself a revolutionary, be it as a Communist or as a Trotskyist, and his discussions with the U.S. Consulate were profoundly political. Hence attributing his actions simply to his personality or artistic temperament, while plausible, does not satisfactorily explain Rivera's motives or the desperate confusion that his statements and actions imply. To appreciate his actions, it is important to recall that the late 1930s and early 1940s was one of those historical periods during which political struggles became transformed into life and death struggles. It was a murderous period in which violence escalated as fears intensified. The Spanish Civil War was but the opening act of a tragedy that engulfed the world and ended in the deaths of tens of millions.

Although geographically remote from war in Europe and the Far East, Mexico experienced this epic struggle directly. The arrival of Spanish Civil War veterans in Mexico meant that the political attitudes and behaviors forged in Spain became part of the fabric of Mexican leftist politics. The Comintern's and Soviet security agents' campaigns there against alleged Trotskyists, such as the P.O.U.M. (*Partido Obrero de la Unificacion Marxista*), whom it charged with being fifth columnists in the war against fascism, stands as evidence of the increasing polarization of and violence inherent in



the struggle. Rivera's comments suggest how directly the politics of the Spanish Civil War affected Mexican politics.

Rivera obviously found those Manichean values unacceptable even though his own views had a certain Manichean quality to them. Although he had shared Trotsky's disdain for Moscow and its supporters for much of the 1930s, Rivera decided to testify before the Dies Committee and to meet with U.S. Consulate officials only after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the outbreak of WWII. For Rivera, the political lines had been clearly drawn, at least for the moment. In this context, his decision to denounce Mexicans to a foreign government stands as but another example of individuals behaving in a manner which made personal sense in a seemingly senseless world. During those years, there were many people in the world, many of whom were more politically sophisticated than the irascible artist, who had abandoned their fervently held beliefs in the necessity for revolutionary change and engaged in political behavior that would have seemed impossible only a short time earlier. Viewed from a broader perspective, therefore, Rivera's actions appear less anomalous than they do at first glance.

But of course, Rivera was forever unpredictable. Whereas others who abandoned communism and revolutionary activities did so forever, Rivera struggled to return to the PCM. He applied for readmission in 1941, only a year after a NKVD agent murdered Trotsky, his former friend and mentor. He did so again in 1946. For the next eight years, he sought to re-join the party that he had betrayed in 1939-40, and that had applauded Trotsky's murder. The PCM repeatedly denied his requests because of his public criticisms of it and his willingness to testify before the Dies Committee. But Rivera persisted. Only in 1954 did it readmit him to its ranks. Had the PCM known of his role as an informant, it would probably have never done so. When he died three years later, he was a Communist in good standing. Whether or not Rivera ever regretted what he did in 1940 may never be known. Given his idiosyncratic political behavior, one wonders.

In contemplating how to factor his actions in early 1940 into our evaluation of Rivera, we should not be too harsh. At that time, he lived in a political limbo, having broken with the two communist movements that had given him his political identity. It was also a difficult artistic period as he received no commissions to paint murals and survived by painting on commission. And he and Frida Kahlo were divorced. The three elements



that had given Rivera his identity--his murals, his politics, and Frida--were gone in early 1940. It was a stressful and uncertain time for Rivera as well as for Mexico and a world at war. Periods of fear, loneliness and stress often produce strange behaviors. Rivera's silence on his dealings with the U.S. Consulate suggest that he would have preferred to forget it. We can not do so. But we should not let it unduly taint our opinion of one of the century's greatest muralists and clumsiest revolutionaries. If anything, his actions in early 1940 simply compound the puzzle that was Diego Rivera.

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<sup>1</sup>Patrick Marnham, *Dreaming with His Eyes Open: A Life of Diego Rivera* (New York, 1998). In Bertram Wolfe's, *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York, 1969), Rivera's politics receive more serious attention.

<sup>2</sup>Although the two men broke relations in January 1939, Trotsky was unable to move into his new residence until May. On the split between Rivera and Trotsky, see Memorandum of Diego Rivera-Curtiss Conversation of January 20, 1939, in which Rivera told Curtiss that "the differences were personal," perhaps a reference to Trotsky reportedly having an affair with Frida Kahlo. But judging from other sources, including reported conversations with Rivera, political factors were very important. See: Charles Curtiss, no title, no date (but on Rivera and apparently written in early 1939); Charles Curtiss, Report of a Meeting with Diego at 5 p.m. March 11, 1939, and Rivera's edited version of that document entitled Report of Meeting with Rivera on March 11, 1939; Charles Curtiss' signed statement on the Rivera-Trotsky split, August 12, 1940; V. T. O'Brien [Trotsky] to John Glenner, March 27, 1939. Trotsky Archives. The Exile Period. Houghton Library, Harvard University. See also, a report on Joseph Hansen's comments on the Rivera-Trotsky split in James Stewart to Secretary of State, December 11, 1939, National Archives of the United States, Record Group (hereafter RG) 59. See also, Jean van Heijenoort, *With Trotsky in Exile. From Prinkipo to Coyoacan* (Cambridge, 1978), 132-139.

<sup>3</sup>On the State Department's concerns, see Assistant Secretary of State Adolf Berle's circulars to embassies and consulates in Latin America dated November 15, 1937, March 7, 1938, November 25, 1938, and December 27, 1939; William Blocker to Secretary of State, March 11 and March 21, 1940. National Archives RG 59.

<sup>4</sup>In 1934, the OGPU (Unified State Political Administration, the political police) was merged with the re-organized Peoples Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD). Although Trotsky and Rivera referred to the Soviet political police as the OGPU or GPU, in fact from 1934 the correct title is the NKVD. The U.S. Consulate received a copy of this list from a U.S. Treasury official who, in turn, received it from Frances Toor, an acquaintance of Rivera's. George Shaw, Memorandum, September 10, 1938. National Archives RG 84.

<sup>5</sup>The quote is from Stewart's memo attached to his letter to Secretary of State, December 8, 1939. National Archives RG 84. Stewart took much of his information of Rivera's pronouncement from *Excelsior*, December 8, 1939. At this time, Rivera also stated that "in case statements are made before the Dies



Committee, those attributed to me must be kept separate from those of Trotsky...[for] I have nothing to do with this gentleman." Stewart to Secretary of State, December 8, 1939. National Archives RG 84.

<sup>6</sup>Josephus Daniels to Secretary of State, December 8, 1939. National Archives, RG 59. See in particular the attached memorandum of conversation between Raleigh Gibson of the U.S. Embassy's staff and Arthur Constantine, the representative of the Hearst newspapers, and the list of names given by Rivera to foreign correspondents.

<sup>7</sup>See James Stewart to Secretary of State, January 11, 1940. National Archives, RG 59. Stewart's report on the meeting was based on that of Louis Blanchard, a member of the Consulate's staff, who attended the meeting, although how he was able to do so is unclear.

<sup>8</sup>George Shaw to Secretary of State, January 5, 1940, and the attached list of "Communist agents furnished by Diego Rivera." Although Shaw did not name the reporter, one suspects that it was Arthur Constantine. National Archives RG 84. Trotsky shared Rivera's view that many refugees from the Spanish Civil War were Soviet police agents. On this, see Trotsky's letter to his attorney, Albert Goldman, January 7, 1939. Trotsky Archives, Harvard University.

<sup>9</sup>Robert McGregor's Memorandum of Conversation with Diego Rivera attached to James Stewart to Secretary of State, January 17, 1940. National Archives RG 59.

<sup>10</sup>Laurence Duggan Memorandum to Adolf Berle, February 6, 1940. National Archives RG 59.

<sup>11</sup>The U.S. government was especially interested in the activities of the PCM and Spanish refugees in Mexico, and had a network of informers to provide them with such information. For examples of the State Department's concern over Spanish refugees and reports on them by informers in Mexico, see: Adolf Berle to George Shaw, February 14, 1940; George Shaw to Secretary of State, May 15, 1940, and the attached Memorandum of Conversation between Robert McGregor of the Consulate staff and Michael Epstein; Robert Murphy to George Shaw, June 3, 1940; J. Edgar Hoover to Adolf Berle, September 6, 1940, and the attached memorandum on "Communist Movement--Mexico"; George Shaw to Secretary of State, September 10, 1940, and the attached Memorandum of Conversation between McGregor and Michael Epstein; J. Edgar Hoover to Adolf Berle, October 17, 1940, and the attached FBI report on Epstein; George Shaw to Secretary of State, October 8, 1940, and the attached "Strictly Confidential" report on "Communism among Spanish Refugees in Mexico" provided by Sr. Paulino Romero, "Chief of the Information Service of Sr. Indalecio Prieto"; George Shaw to Secretary of State, October 31, 1940, and the attached "Strictly Confidential" report on "The So-called Chekas in Spain" provided by Julian Gorkin; George Shaw to Herbert Bursley, November 2, 1940, and the attached letter from Julian Gorkin to Jay Lovestone discussing "Spanish Stalinism" in Mexico. Gorkin gave this unsealed letter to Shaw to transmit via the diplomatic pouch to Lovestone; Memorandum of Conversation between Robert McGregor and Julian Gorkin, December 17, 1940. National Archives, RG 59.

<sup>12</sup>James Stewart to Secretary of State, February 16, 1940; Adolf Berle to James Stewart, March 12, 1940. National Archives, RG 59.

<sup>13</sup>James Stewart to Secretary of State with attached Memorandum of Conversation, March 4, 1940. National Archives, RG 59.

<sup>14</sup>James Stewart to Secretary of State, April 23, 1940. National Archives RG 59.

<sup>15</sup>Robert McGregor Memorandum, May 31, 1940. It is worth noting that Rivera's fear for his safety was not unfounded. On June 1, 1940, his secretary,



Leah Brenner, received a threatening note "to the effect that Mexico was damned dangerous for Trotskists, Riveristas, Almazanistas and yankee capitalists. 'A wurd to the wise is suficint.' Signed XX." The misspellings are in the original. Leah Brenner Protection Case, R. Kenneth Oakley, Reporting Officer, June 2, 1940. National Archives RG 84.

<sup>16</sup>George Shaw to Secretary of State, May 31, 1940; Herndon Goforth to George Shaw, June 4, 1940. National Archives RG 84. For press coverage of Rivera's admission, see *The Brownsville Herald*, June 4 and 5, 1940, and *The Brownsville News*, June 5, 1940.

<sup>17</sup>The FBI Special Agent in Charge in Mexico City, Gus T. Jones, appears not to have learned of Rivera's trip to Brownsville until June 3, the day before his departure. Even then, Jones believed that he was departing from Mexico City. FBI File number 100-155423-5. This was no mere oversight on the Consulate's part since its staff was well aware of the FBI's longstanding interest in Rivera, an interest that dated from the 1920s. Rivera's FBI file, although heavily censured, indicates that the FBI kept a careful eye and compiled an extensive dossier (consisting of reports, newspaper articles, photographs, etc.) on Rivera, especially in 1939-40, when Rivera's allegations about Communist and Nazi influence in Mexico dovetailed with Hoover's obsession with potential spies. When Rivera was in San Francisco in 1940, the FBI tapped his telephone and kept a record of any allegedly suspicious conversations. During WWII, FBI agents and informants sent to Washington reports of Rivera's criticisms of Winston Churchill and his pronouncements on the Allies. When in May 1946, Rivera applied for re-admission to the PCM, FBI agents combed the press and plied informants for information. Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s, the FBI compiled a wide array of disparate information on Rivera based on letters about him to Hoover and regional offices. In 1954, when Rivera filed a damages suit against the U.S. government, the FBI followed the case very carefully. Throughout his life, whenever the FBI found Rivera's name in a suspect's address book, they took due note. For a concise survey of the FBI's surveillance of Rivera, see the 15 page FBI Memorandum dated July 19, 1946, which summarizes what the FBI knew about Rivera to that time. Rivera's FBI File number is 100-155423. On the FBI's surveillance of Rivera's 1927 passage through the U.S. en route to Moscow, see the 28 page collection of documents. File number 100-155423-X to 100-155423-X12. On the tapping of Rivera's telephone while in San Francisco in 1940, see Memorandum for the Special Agent in Charge dated August 22, 1940 and sent from San Francisco. The names of person who wrote the memo and to whom it was sent have been censored. File number 61-503-2. On the reporting of Rivera's wartime pronouncements, see J. Edgar Hoover to Frederick B. Lyon, October 31, 1945, and the attached report on Rivera dated September 24, 1945. File number 100-155423-3. For the FBI report on Rivera's being denied re-admission into the PCM and details about the PCM and its leaders, see the September 24, 1946 report from Mexico City. File number 100-159. For documents and reports, relating to Rivera's suit against the U.S. government, see File number 120-4145. It is worth noting that Gus T. Jones, the FBI Special Agent in Charge in Mexico City, met with Rivera on one occasion. But judging from the report, Rivera's statements were of a general nature about how "the principles and ideals of the Communist Party [in Mexico] have been prostituted." One suspects that if Rivera had said anything more substantive, evidence to this effect would appear in his file. Nor is it clear that Rivera knew he was speaking to an FBI agent. File number 100-155423-5, page 2, citing a letter from Gus T. Jones dated November 30, 1939.